

The Valley of Yeshen

Leo stood over his baldric and axes massaging the back of his neck, then rubbed his furry white cheeks and whiskers, thankful to finally be setting out. The council had at last come to a decision. A decision that he would have made—did make—in minutes. He hated being summoned to council meetings and was grateful they very seldom happened. The council only convened when the priest-king was not available, which was, indeed, rarely. Now was one of those times. He was finally preparing for his quest, a journey he would have liked to have started days ago. However, without the priest-king to lead his people, it fell to the council, which always took too long to make decisions.

He was of the cat kind, the Feleine, a rare race that lived in the mountains and seldom ventured far from the confines of their lands. His fur was predominantly orange with black stripes and white around his nose, mouth, and paw-like hands. His nose was solid black, and his eyes were green, especially unusual for cat folk.

He wore thick leather boots and leather cuirass armor that covered his chest and back, which was strapped to a simple leather fauld made of a heavy belt with large, overlapping flaps of leather that hung to mid-thigh.

Leo snatched up his matching leather baldric, the weapon's holster specially tailored for carrying his battle-axes, and slid it over his head. He strapped the baldric to the shoulder of his cuirass, then to his fauld on the opposite side, so it lay across his chest. After ensuring the straps were tight, he grabbed his two small battle-axes and slid them into the blade holsters on

his baldric, one on his back, the other in front, and set off to meet with the others joining him on his mission.

He grabbed his traveling pack and headed out the door, snatching his gray cloak on the way out and shoving it into his overstuffed traveling bag. He had packed what gear he knew he would need for the dangerous journey. If there was one thing his many years of hunting and traveling had taught him, it was always to be prepared, so he packed clothing for every weather condition he could think of.

“Leorneth, we thought you might have lost your spine!” hollered Slarnath as Leo neared, standing to greet him. Slarnath was one of Leo’s oldest and closest friends. The two were like brothers. Leo knew that Slarn, as they called him, would die for him, as he would die for Slarn.

Slarn wore the same gear as Leo: a baldric worn across the chest, a cuirass, and a fauld covering his midsection. He was all black: his fur, his eyes, his nose, his whiskers, everything. Looking at Slarn was like looking into a dark hole.

“Not today, Slarn. Not today,” Leo replied.

Flanking Slarn were Morlithis and Fieraneth. Morlithis had a coat of many colors, splotched sporadically with white, black, yellow, and gray, and Fieraneth, a female warrior, had pure white fur. They wore the same warrior’s gear as Slarn and Leo. Like Leo, Fieraneth wielded their people’s traditional weapon, the battle-axe, one strapped to the front of her baldric and one strapped high onto her back, so her pack she carried didn’t hinder her access to the axe. Unlike Leo, however, Morlithis and Slarn carried other weapons. Slarn’s weapons of choice

were long knives, and Morlithis's was a crossbow, though he also kept a small battle-axe for close combat.

"Well, then, let's get going, shall we?" Fieraneth suggested. They all nodded, and the four headed out for their mission to save the priest-king, each with their own small bundle of supplies strapped to their backs.

The team of four traveled through the dense forest until nightfall, and Leo, Slarn, and Fiera, as they called her, set up camp and prepared a fire while Morlithis caught their meal with his bow and arrow. Not long after the camp and fire were set, Morlithis returned with a haul of rabbits and squirrels. Soon, the four were enjoying fresh-cooked meat.

"Tomorrow, we should reach the edge of the Yeshen Valley," Leo reported. "We will have to be on our guard while in the valley. It is a very dangerous region," he finished.

"Have you been through the region before?" asked Morlithis.

"He sure has," Slarn answered, replying for Leo. "It was not a pleasant experience, but those were bad times, and things are no longer as bad."

"Not *as* bad," Leo added. "Still bad."

"Well, we all need to get some good sleep tonight," Slarn said, standing up and retiring to his bedroll. "When we are in the Yeshen Valley, we will need to take turns on watch. It should be safe enough here that we don't need to worry about keeping watch." The three soon followed suit, quickly falling asleep after setting out their bedrolls.

The next morning, the four woke at the break of dawn; they rolled up their sleeping rolls, doused the remnants of the smoldering fire, and headed to the Yeshen Valley.

They traveled most of the day in the familiar surroundings of the forest, venturing past their own borders soon after leaving camp and into the seldom-traveled outskirts of the forest.

Rarely did the Feleine people venture more than a day's journey from their villages. However, it was their last-ditch effort to save their priest-king, and desperate times called for desperate measures. He lay deathly ill, and the healer had exhausted all of his vast knowledge of healing herbs and potions but could not heal him. The healer had mentioned to the council that there was a possibility that a rare herb that grew in the Yeshen Valley might be potent enough to cure the priest-king, so the four were sent to find it and bring it back.

Toward the late hours of the afternoon, the party reached the Yeshen Valley, where the forest abruptly stopped at a sheer cliff overlooking the valley. It was deceptively beautiful, with mountains surrounding it and a visible river slicing through the valley's center. The trees seemed even greener than those of the forest, and the air smelled fresher. They knew this to be because of the nearby waterfall. The wind carried the waterfall's mist to them, coating their fur with a cold, thin layer of droplets. The roar of the falling water was not too loud, as it was several hundred yards away.

"It is beautiful," said Fiera.

"Indeed, it is," replied Slarn. "But we must keep our guard up now. It is not as pleasant as it appears, and we have a long way to go."

"There is a cave we can camp in behind the waterfall," Leo reported. The three nodded, and they made their way to the waterfall. The closer they came, the heavier their fur grew as the mist accumulated, soaking them. They reached the edge of the waterfall, its roar now

deafening. Leo neared the edge of the cliff, glancing down before turning around and waving for the others to follow, but as he waved them over, he slipped, falling over the edge.